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Chapter Fourteen: Angelique VIII

October, 2028

Those green eyes didn't boast about displaying an unfortunate combination of anger and fear. I wouldn't be able to say which of the two qualities stood out more,

as they seemed to carry just the right amount of both, like a cocktail of juice and alcohol. They fiercely inserted themselves into my own eyes, alternating between the latter and the mouth of the gun I was aiming at them, which I held.

In front of me, an adult man sat on the ground, dressed in black leather clothes, like those worn by a rocker or a punk, with black hair tied back and an unshaven beard. He trembled in fear, shaking uncontrollably and unable to string coherent words together. Behind him, an older woman with white hair and a heavily wrinkled face; hunched over, she cried while clutching the chair I had ordered her to sit on. Behind that lady, one could see the shelves of what used to be a hardware store.

To my left was a teenager of... I suppose seventeen or eighteen years old, bearing a striking resemblance to the man, who lay on the floor, clutching the right side of his abdomen where I had shot him just moments ago.

Next to my right foot, a revolver. I believe it was a Bulldog .44.

And, behind me, Angelique, who couldn't stop sweating and breathing heavily.

It wasn't spectacular at all, but let me introduce you to how we ended up in that situation.

. . .

Augsburg, southern Germany.

Not long before, just a few months prior, Angelique and I had been driven away from the Swiss border at gunpoint. They didn't even ask us what we wanted or where we came from, or why we had weapons. They didn't shoot at us either, they simply forced us to retreat while aiming their rifles at us.

We walked a lot, among cities and towns, scavenging for food, trying not to waste ammunition, and looking for a place to settle.

Retracing our steps and heading northeast, we arrived in Günzburg, but soon realized that place had nothing for us. So, instead of crossing the Danube, we followed the road eastward and ended up in Augsburg.

It's nothing spectacular, nothing noteworthy. Up to this point, considering what I've told you, it's nothing special. It's just one of the many, many detours we've had to take on our journey. Just one more, just another one.

Except for one simple thing: on the way to Augsburg, Angelique fell ill.

We weren't far from the city when the symptoms started to show, but... it was distressing. Seeing her cough and carefully touch her own throat, her face turning red and her forehead sweating. It was just a flu. Yes, a flu is not a big deal. Of course, a flu is not a big deal... if you have the medication to treat it. If you don't, it can easily turn into a fever that could become deadly.

We were moving at a very slow pace

because Angel needed many more breaks than usually. It wasn't really her who asked for them. If it were up to her, she would have just followed me without complaint, walking until her body couldn't take it anymore. But I could see her pitiful state; it wasn't uncommon to turn around and see her ten meters behind me, taking slow and heavy steps while looking at the ground.

Eventually, we saw the city up close, and instead of taking it easy, we forced ourselves to pick up the pace, risking being seen or heard. It's been a couple of years now, and looking back, I can say that maybe I overreacted, and it wasn't the best idea, but... I was scared. Very scared.

We entered the city from the northeast, almost at the edge. We saw hotels, restaurants, and bars, or what was left of them. We found some pharmacies, but they had all been looted and mostly destroyed. There was nothing useful, not a single antibiotic. From the start, I never had much hope. When I was left alone, separated from my army, I discovered that

drugs were among the most valued items for the looters. I once found myself involved in a shootout trying to steal some bandages.

"... Alez..."

Exiting through the door of the third store we checked, where there was nothing either, Angelique let out an almost inaudible groan while tugging at my coat. We hadn't stopped since we entered the city, and it must have been too much for her. As soon as I stopped, she leaned against the door frame and closed her eyes, proceeding to embrace herself with both arms.

"Just... a second..."

It was concerning. Her fingers were trembling, and I could see her lips quivering.

Evening was approaching, but it wasn't too cold; her fever kept rising.

"Angel."

She didn't raise her head or open her eyes to look at me; instead, she simply hugged herself tighter.

"Wait for me here. Stay inside the pharmacy and close the door. It will be quicker if I search on my own. Besides... you're not helpful to me right now. If something were to happen, if we were to encounter someone, I'd have to drag you along, and we'd both end up dead."

"..."

It was only then that she cast her eyes upon me. Of course, she wouldn't contradict my words, she wouldn't tell me that she didn't want to be left alone or that she didn't want to leave me alone. She could only look at me, hoping that her gaze alone could make me change my mind.

"You get what I'm saying, yes? I doubt you could use your gun like that, let alone-"

"But you..."

"Hm?"

"... if there is anyone nearby, you will not hear them."

I couldn't do anything but look away while clicking my tongue.

She was right. By that point, I had become quite dependent on Angelique's ears. It's not like I'm completely deaf, but my hearing abilities are certainly below average, which in a confrontation is a clear disadvantage. Even more so if it's just me against more than two people.

"... you're going to get us both killed."

I was unnecessarily harsh.

"If something happens, you'll hide."

"Understood..."

I offered her a hand to help her get back on her feet and match my pace. She accepted, and when our palms touched, I felt a tightness in my chest as I noticed how warm she was. We needed to find medicine urgently.

. . .

We checked about four more pharmacies, getting closer to the city center each time, but without success.

In truth, there wouldn't have been any difference between leaving Angelique at that pharmacy or not, because what ultimately made that stroll through the streets worthwhile was not something she could detect with her ears, but something that both of us could clearly perceive.

As we reached a corner, we could perfectly see a gray door silently closing halfway down the block. Instinctively, but without haste, I raised my ACE to eye level and waited in that position for about

a minute, hoping to see someone come out again, but there was no movement.

I lowered my voice just enough.

"You hear anything?"

"No."

I took a step forward, and out of the corner of my eye, I could sense Angelique following closely behind me.

"What did I tell you?"

"..."

Most likely with great reluctance, she stayed in place and didn't take another step.

I continued to move forward, keeping my gaze fixed on the center of the iron sight, making sure it aligned with that gray door. I quickly glanced at the sign above the door to determine the type of place it was.

There were about twenty steps separating

me from that hardware store.

"Hm..."

I had to come to a sudden stop when I was only ten steps away. I felt my breath catch as I saw the doorknob turn, followed by the creaking hinge as the door swung open inward. Only one person emerged... It would have been an easy shot from my ready position, not at all difficult to eliminate him with a single headshot in that brief fraction of a second when his face started to appear, with his gaze down and a gun in his right hand. The guy had short, brown hair and pronounced dark circles under his eyes, in addition to an obvious thinness that didn't seem very healthy. There was only one factor that made me decide not to kill him right there and instead lower my aim to shoot him in the abdomen: as he exited, the boy uttered a word to someone who must have been inside the building. He spoke in German.

My reasoning was as follows:

a) A young man who clearly isn't well-equipped or trained, leaving someone behind.

b) If someone decides to stay inside, they must be guarding that place.

c) If they're guarding it, then it wouldn't be surprising to think it's their shelter.

d) In a shelter, there are provisions.

e) Medications are provisions.

f) I don't need to kill this boy; I can do something much more useful.

And so, I pulled the trigger.

Even if it didn't kill him instantly, a 7.62 impact in such a critical area as the abdomen is...

I heard a scream coming from inside the hardware store. The boy fell to the ground, partially inside what used to be a business, both from the surprise of encountering me and the impact of the bullet, dropping the revolver he carried. He immediately grabbed his wound with both hands, and his face turned pale as he noticed the blood flowing out.

Anticipating that the situation had just turned completely in my favor, I ran to the door and kicked it open fully. There was no one armed on the other side. Just a man and an elderly woman.

I waited a few seconds to see their reactions and then shouted Angelique's name to bring her by my side.

. . .

I had heard how they had communicated before, and I knew that would make things much easier for me.

"Angel, pick up the revolver."

Amidst groans of pain, the teenager on the ground attempted to move and reach for it before she could, but a gentle kick to his face was enough to keep him still once again, without making much noise.

"You're in no position of resisting. The

more you squirm about, the quicker you'll bleed out."

The man's anger compelled him to try to get up from the ground where he was sitting, leaning against the hardware store counter. So, I raised the rifle and put an end to any intention he might have had of jumping at me.

Now, everything was under my control. The injured young man on the floor, the man being threatened at gunpoint, and the elderly woman, clearly incapable of resisting, crying as she watched the boy on the ground.

None of this fills me with pride.

But neither does it bring me guilt.

"Alright..."

I let my eyes wander around the place. The hardware store wasn't... completely emptied. They had left many things behind, to be honest. I suppose they simply weren't high-priority items. There

were a couple of black bags and also some suitcases that caught my attention in the opposite corner of where we were, next to a glass door covered with a black curtain that seemed to lead to the back of the building.

I looked back at the man and did my best to communicate, using the German dialect.

"Medicine. I want all the pharmaceuticals you have."

To my surprise, cooperating with me wasn't the first thing the bearded man did. He widened his eyes and raised his voice, speaking in a way that sounded very, very familiar to me.

"You... you-! You're not german, are you?! Y-you're like us! We're als austrians! Then-"

"Medicine. Don't make me repeat myself."

I could almost see the cold sweat running down his face.

For less than two seconds, he glanced at Angelique, perhaps noticing what was blatantly evident: Angelique wasn't well.

"You... you can't do this to us..."

As if he wanted to earn my compassion in one way or another, he looked at the elderly woman by his side, perhaps trying to convey that they couldn't afford to lose resources with someone with such delicate health among them.

I lowered the rifle and let it hang, only to reach for my 92 and aim it back at him.

"Don't... P-please! L-look at her! Look at us! We won't survive out there if we don't-!"

"Hand out th-"

"We could work together! Take care of each other! I-if you come with us we could share and-!"

Slowly, the seated man lost interest in the gun pointed at him and focused on the young man by my side. It was clear to me that he must have been his son. He wasn't going to soften me. In my mind, that man was only buying time until he came up with a plan to lunge at me and try to overpower me by any means necessary.

I was alone. I couldn't expect Angelique to be of any help in her current state. Given the circumstances, I wouldn't hesitate to kill them all if it suddenly became necessary.

Would I have taken the same path if Angelique could have aided me? Honestly, I don't know.

"..."

Feeling cornered, that man lowered his gaze and forced the following words to escape his trembling lips.

"We... we don't have anything."

He didn't even seem to be trying to camouflage that obvious lie.

"... I offer you the opportunity to collaborate, but you squander it, when it would be easier for me to simply eliminate you and search on my own. Don't hold a grudge against me for whatever might happen now."

That was also a lie. I didn't have much time to waste, and if they had made this their base, it wouldn't be surprising for them to have hidden the most valuable things in a hard-to-reach place.

"Let's see..."

After taking another quick look around the store, my attention returned to those suitcases in the corner.

"Angelique, be careful and check what's inside those suitcases. Don't walk close to

that man."

After my companion's brief confirmation, I heard a groan coming from the young man on the floor. I glanced at him and raised my voice again.

"Your child is bleeding profusely, with an unsightly exit wound in the lower part of his back. The flesh around it has detached, albeit not significantly. I am using standard jacketed 7.62 ammunition. It should be possible to patch and stitch the wound, and if you're lucky, the bullet might not have hit any vital organs, making it potentially non-lethal... that is, if you attend to it as soon as possible. As time passes, he'll lose more and more blood, and there are no active medical facilities where a blood transfusion could be performed. How far do you think he can go with hemorrhagic anemia? That, indeed, could be easily fatal. Furthermore, if you disclose where you have the medications hidden, and if by chance you have injectable tranexamic acid, I have no

problem leaving it for you. That could save his life. So, what do you say? Are you more inclined to cooperate now?"

With each of my words, the man's head drooped lower and lower as he realized he was running out of options. I'm not sure if everything I said then was medically correct, but it seemed to be effective as a method of intimidation.

However...

"We... still don't have anything."

I could see the elderly woman opening her mouth to say something, but a glance from the man made her simply cover her face with both hands and continue crying silently.

"That's how it's going to be..."

"Alez."

"Yes?"

Angelique spoke to me from the other side of the room with a weak voice. Beside her, the suitcases were wide open.

"Only food, clothes, water and ammo here."

"I see..."

Why wasn't he confessing to me? Any other man would have spilled everything upon seeing his injured son on the floor. What was preventing him from doing so?

"We'll swtich tactics. Come here, Angel."

I watched her stumble over her own feet a couple of times in the less than ten meters that separated her from the door next to where I was standing. She was... weak. And even though I was used to presenting myself as strong in these types of situations, the truth is that I felt my brain boiling with helplessness. I had to heal Angelique. Everything was permitted,

and I was willing to do anything. I didn't care about anything. Killing a man, killing a child, killing an elderly woman. My conscience would torment me later, that was the least of my concerns. What mattered was...

"I'm also running out of time, so we're going to speed things up."

"W-what are you-"

"This."

I bent my back, grabbed the hair of the boy beside me, and lifted him to the level of my hip. The boy let out a scream of pain. The elderly woman was horrified to see the amount of blood on the floor. The man put a hand to his throat as the barrel of my gun pointed sideways at his son's head.

"If the boy is not that important to you anyway, there's no difference if it's the bleeding or myself what ends up killing him. I'll countdown starting from five.

Hand out the medicine."

No one moved a muscle. Everyone, including Angelique, seemed to be rendered speechless by such a threat. Even time seemed to stand still. No sound came from outside, and inside, only quiet groans could be heard.

"Four."

Only then, everything resumed its rhythm. The elderly woman shouted something that I didn't understand, Angelique's eyes widened, the boy started crying, and the man tried to stand up.

"Three."

They started arguing among themselves. I couldn't understand what the woman was saying; her words were too distorted by her sobbing. However, I do remember how the man kept demanding that she stay silent, tears in his eyes as well.

"Two."

"STOP!"

"One."

It was the elderly woman who screamed.

The apparent old punk tried to lunge at me, but the sound of the gunshot made him stop.

"Huh, I missed."

Just before pulling the trigger, I raised the gun only just enough for the bullet to travel over the boy and hit the wall.

Once again, everyone remained frozen in their place.

After a couple of seconds, the boy's labored breathing broke the silence. It wouldn't be surprising to think that he was having a panic attack.

"Such things happen sometimes. I'll just make sure I won't miss next time."

I rested the barrel against the boy's temple, and without any preamble, I began the countdown again.

"Five."

"No! Stop! Please stop! I-I'll tell you everything but please lower your weapon!"

Contrary to the man who still couldn't speak, the elderly woman decided to raise her frail voice, causing me to lower the gun and release the boy, who fell back onto the floor of the hardware store.

That time... yes, without a doubt, I would have killed him.

"... good."

Even though I let him fall, I didn't stop aiming at the young man on the floor.

"Mom..."

It became clear what the relationship was between the elderly woman and the man, who simply looked at her, feeling defeated.

"The suitcase on the right has a... hidden compartment. There's a first aid kit in there."

I just had to look at Angelique for her to understand what she needed to do. She silently went to check the same spot again, raising her head after a few seconds.

"It's true. Here it is, Alez."

I could sense the man watching Angelique as she returned to me, perhaps considering that it wouldn't be difficult to overpower her. However, he refrained from doing so, either because his spirit had been broken or because he realized it was a terrible idea.

"Take this, and give me that."

I handed the girl my gun and leaned against the door frame to examine the first aid kit. It was quite eye-catching for a first aid kit, and it looked well-stocked. Transparent, plastic, and sterile in appearance. It contained many, many things. With a quick glance, I could see ibuprofen and some cough syrup, but it wasn't the moment to decide what would be useful or not. Besides, everything could come in handy in the future. However, as a small compensation for the elderly woman who had chosen to trade her life for her grandson's, I took out some compresses, bandages, and a pack of medical needles and thread. I let them all fall next to the boy on the floor. Then, I put the whole thing inside Angel's backpack and took the gun from her hands.

"That's all. If your kid was lucky, that should be enough to save him. Angelique, we're leaving."

No one responded to me.

Neither the elderly woman, nor the man, nor the boy, nor Angel. I took a step back, Angelique followed me, and I closed the door without looking at anyone inside, leaving them to their fate.

"..."

I couldn't help but stare at the door for a minute, listening as someone inside became desperate in their attempts to treat the injured young man.

"Alez..."

"Yes, we're leaving."

. . .

That night, about two kilometers away from where I committed that robbery, Angelique was sleeping on a random couch, covered with a blanket. I gave her what I thought would be useful for her

condition, and it didn't take her long to recover.

Angelique...

Sometimes I wonder how do you remember situations like that.

Do you see me as a bad person, Angel?

Do you know, as well as I do, that maybe that level of violence wasn't necessary?

Do you think it would have been better to try to reach an agreement instead of resorting to such a brutal threat?

It's true, in the end, the first aid kit had more than enough for both groups to continue their paths without worries.

So, I...

Yes... the logical conclusion is that today, perhaps my way of acting, being, and thinking is not much different from that of any ordinary bandit.

I didn't want to take any risks.

I didn't hesitate to become a monster in order to ensure our... your well-being.

So, I shouldn't be surprised that you

often come to the same conclusions.

Of course, I'm a hypocrite.

Damn, I'm terribly hypocritical.

You didn't lose your humanity by trying to follow my orders, Angelique.

You're losing it because, whether I like it or not, I am your role model.

What I see in you is a reflection of what I am.

...

I have to get you out of here.

I have to give you something better.

You don't have to be like this.

You don't have to be like this.

Life isn't meant to be lived this way, Angelique.

Not everyone acts like this.

But I can't convince you of that.

You've seen too much.

You've firsthand experienced the rottenness of human actions.

But out there, there must still be a place

where you can grow not to be like this.

To not be...

I wish that as you grow up, you'll be like Zara.

In fact, you resemble her a bit, here and there.

I don't want to wait ten years for things to get better anymore.

There has to be some place.

There has to be...

I don't want this life to be all you know.

I don't have much life left, not for myself.

But it doesn't matter anymore, my life has lost its value.

All it means is that I'm running out of time to lead you onto a better path.

And I will do it, Angel.

Even if it means giving out every drop of my blood.

I was the one responsible for ruining your life, so I will be the one to bring back its sparkle.

Maybe it will be the last good deed I do in my life.

I love you, Angelique.

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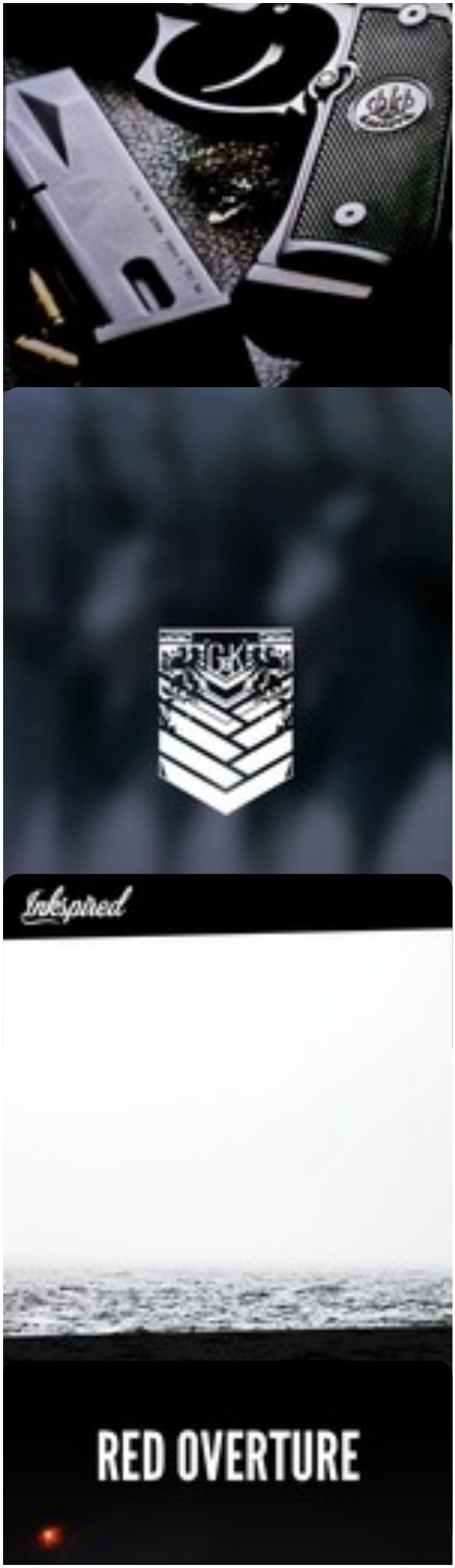
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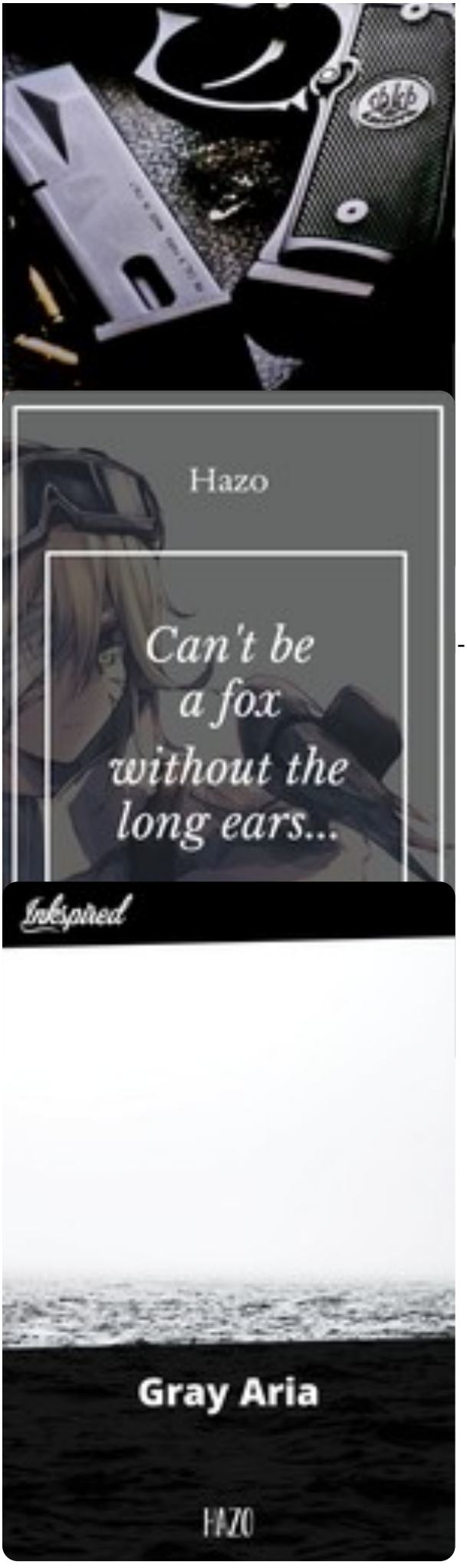
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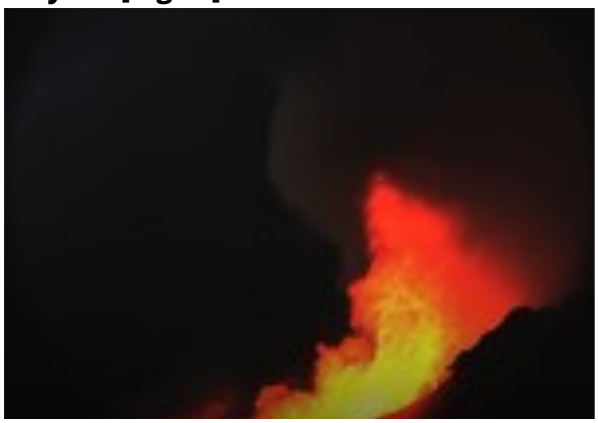

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